

Washington, Nov. 23 -- The US Commission on International Religious Freedom has expressed its concern over the recent "introduction of martial law" in Pakistan by President Pervez Musharraf, saying that it has damaged the legitimacy of his government and seriously threatened the future of democracy.

In a statement, the Commission said that while Musharraf contends that the suspension of democratic procedures and the Constitution was due to the dangers posed by religious extremists, but has demonstrated his willingness to silence Pakistan's democratic debate under the guise of security considerations

In the garb of martial law Musharraf got arrested judges, lawyers, human rights activists, journalists, and other leaders of the civil society and severely undermined the rule of law, it said.

Equally troubling, at the same time as democratic institutions have been quashed, Musharraf has released a group of people being held on charges of extremism and terrorism.

"Musharraf's actions have imperilled the few human rights protections that did exist in Pakistan," said Commission Chairman Michael Cromartie.

"Together with his previous policies that served to bolster the influence of Islamist extremist groups, the current suspension of the constitution, dismissal of the SC justices, curbs on media, and mass detentions will undermine further the right to freedom of religion or belief in that country," he said.

The Commission has called on the US to protest the imposition of martial law and suspension of the Constitution in Pakistan and to insist that the Musharraf regime to release all imprisoned and detained civil society leaders, the Daily Times reported.